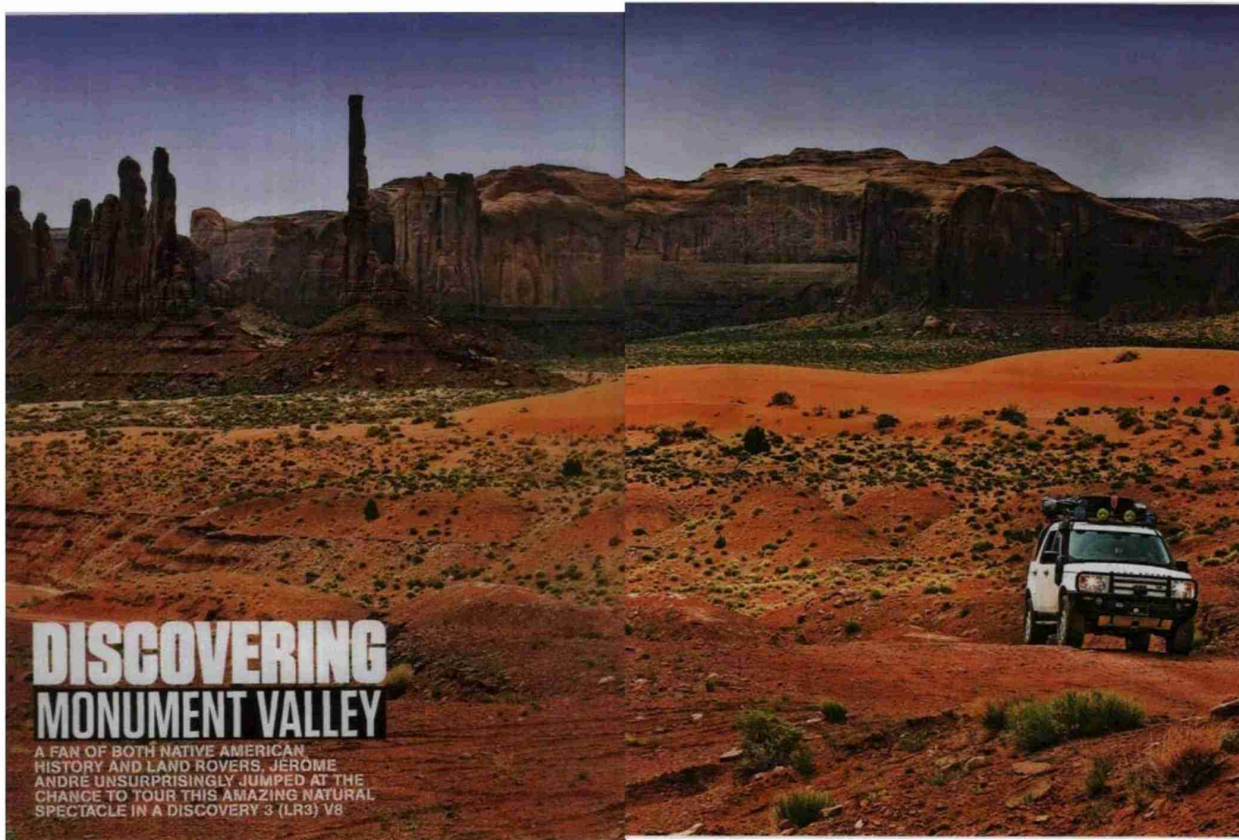


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What would you do if you could live out your Wild West fantasies? For me, I would jump at the chance without thinking twice.

Which was what happened when my friend, Philippe Lacarriere, who runs The Great Escape 4WD tours in Las Vegas, invited me along on one of his reconnaissance trips to Monument Valley, on the border between Utah and Arizona. Thankfully, we wouldn't be exploring this Navajo park on horseback but in the more comfortable confines of a 4.4-litre Discovery 3 V8 – or LR3, as they call it in America.

Monument Valley is one of the most distinctive and recognisable areas of America, even for people who have never had the chance to visit. For decades, the sand desert, vast mesas and monolithic rock formations have been photographed and filmed by the advertising and movie industries. The famous Hollywood director John Ford used Monument Valley as the location for many of his most famous Western films, including Stagecoach (1939), Fort Apache (1948) and The Searchers (1956).

Despite its name, Monument Valley is not actually a valley. Rather, it is part of the vast, arid Colorado Plateau and set within the Navajo Tribal Park, which is sprinkled with towering rock formations that have survived millions of years of erosion. The park can be visited in a regular car, although access would be limited to a 17-mile loop of dirt track called Valley Drive, which can be driven in a couple of hours. We strongly suggest opting for a 4WD vehicle to visit the other tracks and remote outposts, along with a mandatory guide.

For our trip, Philippe and I have enlisted the aid of guide Jimmy Keith, the son of a Navajo medicine man. Jimmy not only knows the territory, being an expert on local history and a proponent of Navajo culture, but is also an accomplished singer and musician. This private trip is quite a privilege as Jimmy takes us to his favourite spots, many of them not accessible via the loop road.

Leaving from Lookout Point, we start out along Valley Drive for a tour around Monument Valley that will conclude at

the Totem Pole, a towering sliver of rock that's 600ft high but just 14ft across.

Along the way, Jimmy will introduce us to the following 11 wonders of Monument Valley.

THE MITTENS AND MERRICK BUTTE

These three rock formations are the best-known landmarks of the park, consisting of East Mitten, West Mitten and Merrick Butte. The Mittens both look like hands sheathed in mitten gloves, while Merrick Butte was named after a prospector who was killed while searching for silver in the mountains. The trio is best appreciated from Lookout Point as the sun sets.

ELEPHANT BUTTE No prizes for guessing where Elephant Butte gets its name! The pachyderm-shaped sandstone monolith is accessible along a sandy track. Proceed with care, ideally accompanied by another 4WD.

THREE SISTERS Facing Elephant Butte, three spires stand tall – according to Navajo legend, they are three tribeswomen who were turned to stone.

JOHN FORD'S POINT Film-maker John Ford used Monument Valley as the location for seven movies over the course of 20 years. The area bearing his name offers a stunning panoramic view of Valley Drive and the surrounding landmarks. You can even have your picture taken on horseback, standing at the lip of the promontory.

CAMEL BUTTE Viewed from the south, this sandstone formation resembles a camel. Iron and manganese oxidation give the stone its rich red colour.

THE HUB This 150ft peak marks the frontier between the rock maze and the four-mile sand desert. This is where we crossed a junction to visit Saddle Rock, Submarine Rock, the Totem Pole and the Ear of the Wind. This is also where Jimmy introduces us to Navajo singing, then plays his flute, honouring the land.

THE TOTEM POLE AND YEI BI CHEI

As we drive along, the track gets sandier and sandier, especially approaching Rain God Mesa. High Dunes face the Thunderbird Mesa, while the Sand Spring stream irrigates the scrub brush. Then more peaks appear; the distinctive Yei Bi Chei and the Totem Pole.

SAND SPRING The Sand Spring parking area offers an amazing view of Yei Bi Chei. Make sure to stop here for a walk.

Yei Bi Chei is named after the Navajo fire dancers who take part in the tribe's annual winter religious ceremony.

ARTIST'S POINT John Ford's Point might be more famous, but the Artist's Point has the advantage of being less crowded. Don't forget your sketchpad or camera. This is absolutely stunning.

NORTH WINDOW This gap between Elephant Butte and Cly Butte (named after a venerated Navajo chief who is

buried at the foot of the rocks) offers a stunning view of East Mitten Butte. Once parked, walk the 500-yard footpath for a view of East Mitten in which the 'hand' changes shape as you walk.

THE THUMB With a bit of imagination – or the help of some local 'firewater' – you will see the 'thumb' formed by the rocks. This landmark offers a superb view of Camel Butte. The quickest route back to the start is less than four miles.



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All through our trip, Jimmy cannot stop commenting on the comfortable ride offered by the LR3 compared with his 30-year-old Ford F150, as well as complimenting the finish of the interior. He's also impressed with the Terrain Response control system and how it copes with everything that the arid, dusty landscape can throw at it.

As much as we agree with him, Philippe and I are both busy having our breath taken by the awe-inspiring scenery. We leave Jimmy to discover the Land Rover's electronic equipment, while asking him dozens of questions about the monoliths and natives.

It is quite difficult to emphasise the sheer beauty of Monument Valley without overdoing it. The park is marvellous, hence the continuous flow of tourists visiting the area and the movie-makers who still flock here to use it as a film location.

Now is definitely the time to visit, especially as the exchange rate with the US dollar is in Sterling's favour. And the best way to make the most of your trip is definitely in a Land Rover. **LRO**

NEED TO KNOW

OFFICIAL WEBSITES :

utah.com/monumentvalley;
nps.gov/nava/index.htm;
navajonationparks.org/htm/monumentvalley.htm

RENTING A LAND ROVER.

Getting hold of a Land Rover in North America is quite difficult. A few rental companies such as Enterprise offer LR4s and Range Rovers in their premium lines, but will

not guarantee availability. Depending on where you are travelling, you can contact car rental firms such as Beverly Hills Rent

a Car (various locations in Los Angeles and Las Vegas). However, bear in mind that none of these companies allows any actual off-roading. I have used the services of The Great Escape (greatestescape.fr) based in Las Vegas, which offers 4x4 tours, but unfortunately the LR3 we used is privately owned and not for rent.

WHERE TO STAY:

Whether you wish to spend a night or a week, there are several places to stay at Monument Valley. However, some hotels are fully booked months in advance, so make sure to plan your trip well ahead. There are various official campsites in the area, but toilets and facilities are very basic.

VALLEY HERITAGE HISTORY

The first inhabitants of Monument Valley were the Anasazi Indians, who disappeared for unknown reasons during the 13th century. The only evidence of them are the remains of their cave dwellings, handicrafts, petroglyphs and petroglyphs. After the departure of the Anasazi, the region became part of the tribal homelands of the Navajo nation.

In 1863, the American government sent Colonel Kit Carson to quell a Navajo uprising by deporting the tribe 400 miles away. They were kept away for four years before finally being allowed to return home, albeit to a government proscribed reserve.

Now, the Navajo are one of the few Native American tribes to perpetuate their ancient traditions, use their

own language, practise traditional crafts and pursue a rural lifestyle of raising sheep and weaving wool. The Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park is the centre of their culture.

GEOLOGY:

Over the course of 270 million years, Monument Valley was formed by sediment running off from the Rocky Mountains. This led sandstone and limestone to fill up the valley, resulting in the formation of those distinctive rock 'monuments', with their red colour coming from the iron and manganese present in the stone. During the past 50 million years, rain and wind has eroded the softer stone, leaving only the famous monoliths, some of which reach 1200ft. The Navajo tribe named each of the rock formations in celebration of their myths and legends, or in honour of historical events which took place in their vicinity – although a few of them have more playful nicknames, such as Snoopy!

POPULAR CULTURE:

Before film director John Ford came to Monument Valley to shoot his movie Stagecoach in 1938, the US government had turned its back on the region and most Americans were unaware of its existence.

The magnificent scenery so impressed Ford that he shot a further six films in the area over 20 years. It has also served as inspiration for other movie-makers, including Clint Eastwood, who was shown climbing and sitting on the pinnacle of the Totem Pole in The Eiger Sanction (1975). Other films shot on location here include 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), Easy Rider (1969), Vanishing Point (1971), Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989) and Back to the Future Part III (1990).



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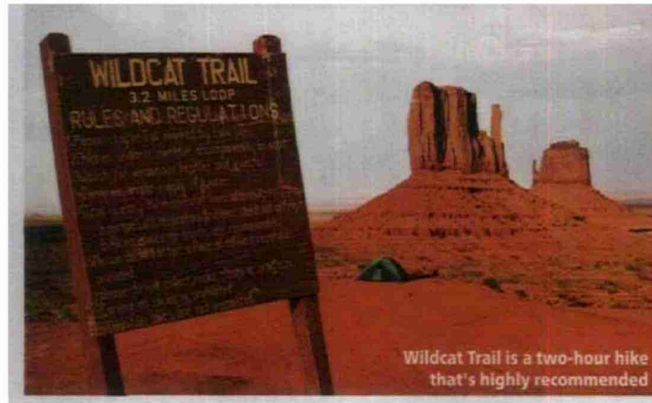
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VALLEY OF THE GODS

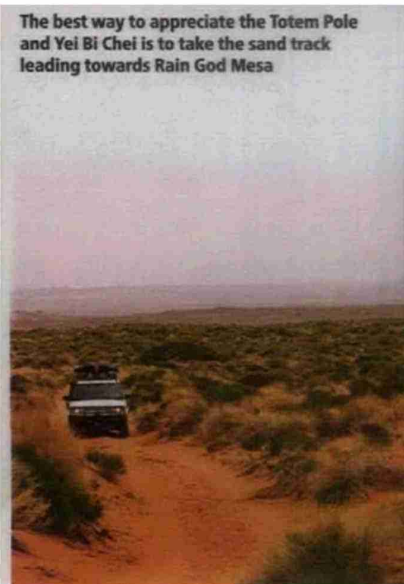
The Valley of the Gods is often referred to as a miniature Monument Valley. Showcasing similar blood-red monoliths and impressive plateaux, the major advantage of this valley is that it's off the beaten track for most tourists, allowing you to enjoy the calm and seclusion. Also, there are no restrictions as regards camping, walking or hiking. However, off-roading is not allowed.

We highly recommend the drive along the 17-mile dirt road (FR 242) that winds its way through the valley: alternative tracks are subject to permit or are restricted. Your best bet is to purchase a detailed map, available from any local gas station.

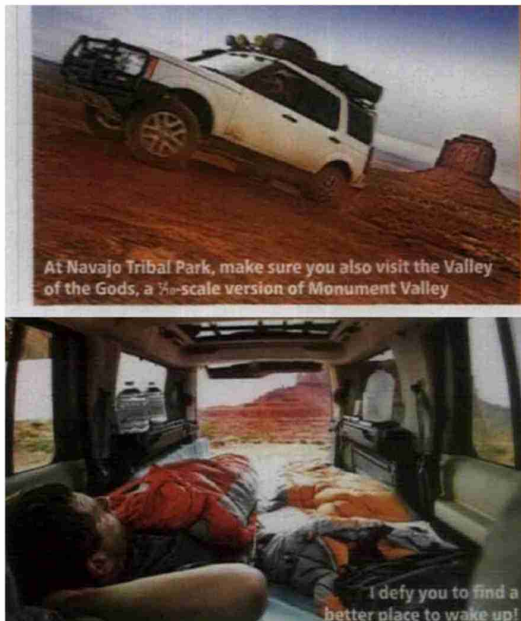


Wildcat Trail is a two-hour hike that's highly recommended

The best way to appreciate the Totem Pole and Yei Bi Chei is to take the sand track leading towards Rain God Mesa



At Navajo Tribal Park, make sure you also visit the Valley of the Gods, a 1/4-scale version of Monument Valley

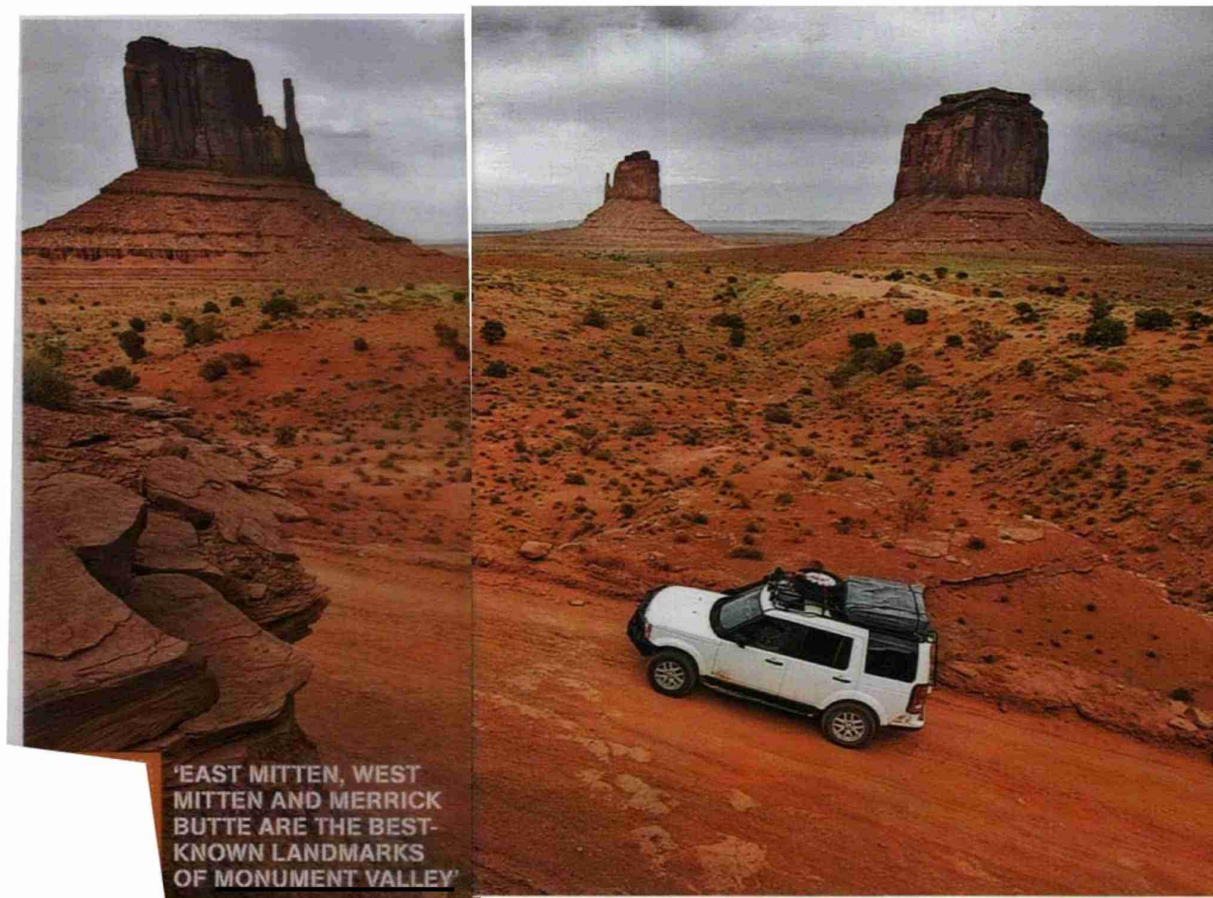


I defy you to find a better place to wake up!



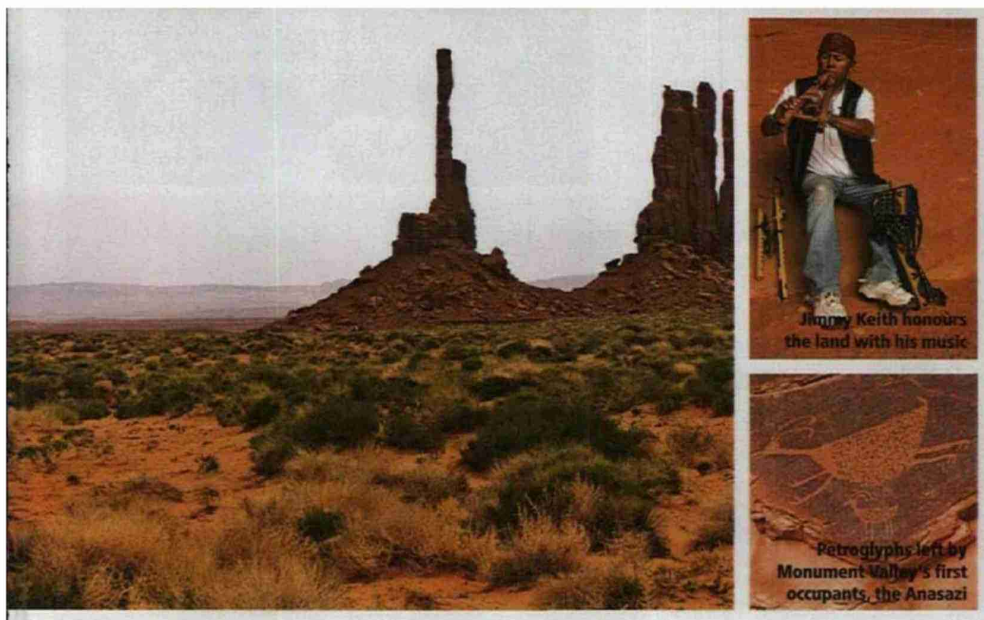
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